

## **History of Fairbury's Hospitals**

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Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to the Indiana border. The population of Fairbury in 1860 was 262 residents. By the year 1900, Fairbury's population had grown from only 262 to 2,187 citizens. During this era, Fairbury often had about six medical doctors serving the community. There were no hospitals nearby, and the doctors all made house calls. Patients were typically treated in their homes. The first hospital in the Fairbury area was the St. James Hospital in Pontiac, Illinois. It was first established in 1907.

In 1909, two young women attended nursing school at the Hinsdale, Illinois, Sanitarium Training School. One of these young women was Rachel Olson. She was born in 1879 in Chicago. The other young woman was Anna Martha Gadeken. She was born in Germany in 1886. She married William Vetter in Nebraska at age seventeen in 1903. Rachel and Martha graduated from the Hinsdale nursing school in May of 1909.

In 1911, these two young women established the first hospital in Fairbury. Rachel Olson was thirty-two years old, and Mrs. Vetter was twenty-five years old. They created this first hospital in the second story of the Archer House on Locust Street. The Archer House is several buildings to the west of the Walton Centre. The Archer House name on the front of the building was repainted in May of 2018.

After a short while, they moved the hospital to a house located at the northwest corner of First and Oak Streets. They then moved the hospital again to 313 West Oak Street. On this site was the John Monroe cement block house at the southeast corner of Oak and Webster Streets.

In August of 1912, the editor of the Lake Union Herald medical magazine paid a visit to the Fairbury hospital. The editor reported that Miss Rebecca Olson assisted Mrs. Martha Vetter in a house sufficiently large enough to accommodate four or five patients. They had one room fitted up for operating, and one of the resident physicians brought his surgical patients to their little institution. The editor said the hospital offered electric light baths, massage, galvanic and sinusoidal electricity, and high-frequency treatments. The editor said the new hospital was having excellent success.

In 1913, "Martha" Gadeken married Charlotte farmer William Henry Hoppe Jr. in Fairbury. They had four children. In 1930, they moved to Nebraska. In 1933, at the age of forty-six, Martha experienced gallstone problems, and she died in Nebraska. Rachel Olson continued to work at the various Fairbury hospital locations. She died in Fairbury in 1970.

The hospital in the house located at 313 West Oak Street became a community project. Without any persuasion, local citizens banded together and gave freely of their time and talents to remodel the residence. At that time, the public felt that the hospital was their responsibility. They thought it was there to serve their needs and that they must help to make it a good hospital. Local carpenters donated labor and tools and began remodeling the inside. Local decorators painted walls, refinished woodwork, and polished floors. On February 2, 1914, the new hospital was formally opened to the public. The hospital at this location served the Fairbury area for fourteen years until 1928.

In 1928, local community leaders decided that Fairbury needed a larger hospital. On January 29, 1928, the Hospital Board bought a large house on South Fifth Street from the estate of Frieda Munz Scharlach for \$6,155. This home was one of the oldest in Fairbury and was built by J. J. Taylor in 1868.

Again, local volunteers helped to remodel this large, rambling house into a hospital. The American Legion was very generous in contributing to the new hospital. The volunteers converted the residence into a ten-bed hospital with a large kitchen, a nursery, a dumb waiter, an elevator, and a reception office. They made an addition to the house, which gave the hospital an operating room. On August 17, 1929, the public was invited to view the new hospital. Fairbury residents were pleased with the accomplishments.

On October 1, 1941, the ground was broken for a new obstetrical unit. A year and a half later, on February 13, 1943, the modern brick obstetrical unit was opened for public inspection. The maternity wing could handle eleven mothers at one time. This wing had twelve bassinets and one incubator for premature babies. A walkway was constructed to connect the house to the new brick obstetrical unit.

Around 1947, a young boy named Carl Borngasser (1937-2023) had his appendix removed at the old house on South Fifth Street. One of Carl's nurses was Rachel Olson.

The second phase of expanding the hospital was the second wing addition. The ground was broken for the second wing on August 9, 1950. The last stage of the hospital expansion plan was completed by May of 1952. A grand opening ceremony for the completed hospital was held on November 21, 1953. Shortly after the grand opening, the kitchen area was expanded to handle the increased number of patients.

The total cost of the three phases of hospital construction in 1953 was \$336,000. This expenditure would be equivalent to \$3.2 million in today's dollars. The new hospital had a capacity of ninety-two beds.

In 1964, the Helen Lewis Smith pavilion was added to the north end of the hospital. Its twenty-three-patient capacity brought the total size of the hospital up to 115 beds. The maximum employment level for the hospital and the pavilion was about 135 people.

By 1990, there were not enough new babies being born at the Fairbury Hospital to justify keeping the obstetrics unit open. It closed in March of 1990.

Many factors caused the number of patients at the Fairbury Hospital to decline in the early 1990s. The number of days of hospitalization required for various procedures was dramatically reduced. Specialty outpatient services were available in Pontiac, Bloomington, Champaign, and Peoria. Patients who required medical services sought out larger hospitals. These larger hospitals had better facilities and more experience handling different types of procedures.

The Hospital Board tried to cope with the massive decline in the number of patients at the Fairbury Hospital. Proposals were sought and received from at least three different medical organizations. None of these proposals solved the problem of needing more patients. In 1994, in-patient services were stopped. In January of 1995, no more emergency room patients were admitted. Sadly, after eighty-four years of having a hospital within the city, Fairbury had to rely on hospital services from Pontiac, Bloomington, Peoria, and Champaign.

The Fairbury Hospital is now being torn down in the Fall of 2023. Many people have driven by the construction site to witness the final days of the Fairbury Hospital.

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*The Fairbury Hospital*

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February 1946 photo looking northeast at the old house on South Fifth Street that served as the Fairbury Hospital. Note walkway connecting house to new brick obstetrics building.





November 1953 photo of Nurse Frances Ann Maley operating the new X-ray machine at the Fairbury Hospital. Nurse Maley was also the Livingston County Nurse and was the grandmother of Dale C. Maley.